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Former DPNR Commissioner says territory must learn from Epstein's legacy

By SUZANNE CARLSON Daily News Staff
Feb 18, 2020



Jean-Pierre Oriol

Photo by Barry Leerdam, V.I. Legislature



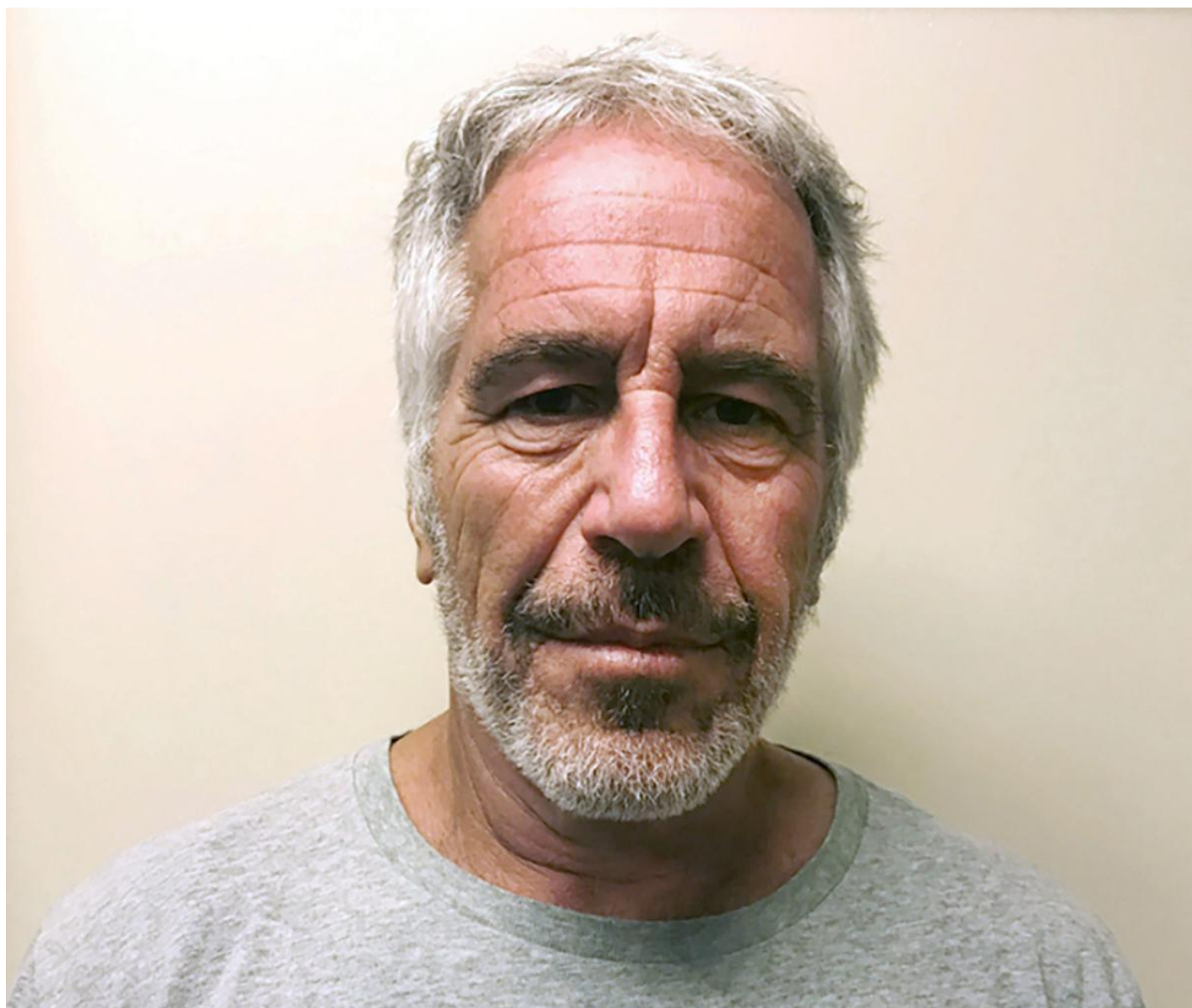
Alicia
Barnes



Erika Kellerhals



Dawn Henry
CLARA_FREEMAN



Jeffrey Epstein

HOGP



File photo by MIAMI HERALD Jeffrey Epstein's former home on the island of Little St. James off St. Thomas.

File photo by MIAMI HERALD

Sex offender Jeffrey Epstein used his wealth and charisma to charm his way into the good graces of the international elite, entertaining presidents and royalty at his mansions in New York, Palm Beach and Paris.

It wasn't surprising, then, that he would do the same with some of the most powerful people in the Virgin Islands, according to Dawn Henry, who dealt with Epstein during her time as commissioner of the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

New York and Paris have no shortage of millionaires and billionaires, but Henry said the residents of St. Thomas, where Epstein had his primary residence for the last 20 years, are not accustomed to individuals with hundreds of millions of dollars .



“Mr. Epstein was in a pretty unique situation in the territory,” Henry said. “Coming into such a small community, you’re going to have a big impact.”

Henry served as DPNR commissioner from 2015 through 2018 and interacted with Epstein and his St. Thomas attorney, Erika Kellerhals, on multiple occasions.

“Mr. Epstein was not treated any differently than any other person that came to the department,” Henry said. “And that upset him. But I let Mr. Epstein know this is what it is. And I personally feel that when I was the commissioner for DPNR, for the first time, the department not only issued — on paper — notices of violation, but we followed through with them.”

Enforcing violations

Construction on Epstein’s islands — Little St. James, which he purchased in 1998, and neighboring Great St. James, acquired in 2016 — repeatedly violated local and federal laws.

“The public, they were very helpful with DPNR in terms of shortcomings with our manpower to be able to vigilantly monitor what was happening on this secluded, separate island,” Henry said.

Epstein’s power base

Epstein was used to getting his way, Henry said, and was a formidable foe during negotiations over the fines and penalties DPNR ordered him to pay for the environmental laws he broke on the islands.

“You look out at the table and you have Mr. Epstein, and then he has, I guess, the knowledge that money can buy, let’s put it that way. Or the power that money can buy,” Henry said. “It can be intimidating.

“You have this thing in the pit of your stomach, because you know you’re going to have to tell them what they don’t want to hear. And you know it ain’t going to go well.”

Given all that’s happened since Epstein’s re-arrest and suicide death in August inside a New York jail, Henry said it might be difficult to understand the kind of power he wielded. Even after his 2008 conviction, Henry said he still commanded tremendous respect from many in the community.

“It’s easy to criticize after the fact, but people don’t know what you go through when you try to toe the line,” Henry said. “It’s not isolated to people in the Virgin Islands. When you are trying to do the right thing, the proper way, people who are accustomed to going around, coming in the back door, going down the left street, it’s just so many of them swarming around you.

“They push back against you. You’re this, you’re that — distorting what you’re doing. You’re a treehugger, you don’t care about the people. And they make it difficult.

“I do believe that the level of his money influenced their behavior with him. I’m sure,” Henry said.

“How many of them do you think would have said to Mr. Epstein, ‘You know Jeffrey, you know this thing with these young girls? This isn’t right, you shouldn’t be doing that.’ People don’t do that. We don’t.”

Skirting the rules?

Governors Charles Turnbull and John de Jongh Jr. were in office for the first decade that Epstein lived in the territory. Henry was appointed by Gov. Kenneth Mapp, and said it was clear to her that Epstein had been allowed to skirt the rules in the past.

“Mr. Epstein had a certain expectation, and I told him that is not going to work with me,” Henry said.



Sen. Alicia Barnes, who served as DPNR Commissioner from 2011 to 2014, said Epstein received “no special treatment” during her tenure. “Not under my tenure, for sure,” she said noting Epstein received a notice of violation during her time with the department.

Barnes returned a \$1,000 campaign contribution from Southern Trust Company Inc. after learning Epstein owned the business, and insists she “did no special favors for Jeffrey Epstein before, during, or after my tenure as DPNR commissioner.”

Current DPNR Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol — who has been with the department since 2000 — has said Epstein never received special treatment. But like Henry, he said the department didn’t have adequate manpower or vessels to monitor Epstein’s islands, and whatever enforcement penalties were levied had little effect.

“Some persons, when hit with a violation of a certain kind, they see the violation as the deterrent and stop for corrective action,” Oriol told The Daily News in late 2019. “In this particular case, you know, this individual, after receiving a number of penalties from the department, settling each one — it didn’t serve as the deterrent that we hoped it would.”

Henry said Epstein wasn’t afraid to take his complaints to the highest authorities.

“Epstein even took me to the governor,” and complained to Mapp that his construction plans were being held up by DPNR, Henry said.

Henry said Mapp backed her up, telling Epstein “ ‘If the regular person on the street has to do it, you with all the resources, you could hire an engineer, just apply. Get the permits,’ ” Henry said.

“He was accustomed from the previous time, not having to do those things,” she said.

Delayed ‘moral position’

During his life, “Mr. Epstein was treated, because he had money, with a certain level of, ‘whatever he wanted to do, he should be able to do,’” Henry said. “And I find it disingenuous that now the man is dead, we all of a sudden have grown some level of moral position concerning who Mr. Epstein was and the things that he did and was doing.”

“Everybody” knew Epstein was a sex offender, Henry said. But, it was up to the law enforcement agencies tasked with monitoring him to ensure he wasn’t committing additional sex crimes — not DPNR.

“That has nothing to do with my jurisdiction. You have to understand, we all have to stay in our lane,” Henry said. “That’s not my lane. When I was the commissioner for DPNR, I didn’t treat somebody that committed a crime, that did their time, any different.”

DPNR was one of the few government agencies with the authority and the ability to physically access Epstein’s islands, and while Henry said she never personally set foot on either island, DPNR enforcement officers did.

Epstein’s ability to influence the community by employing and befriending a few powerful individuals is unsurprising in hindsight, Henry said.

While Epstein was being feted for donations to local schools and charities, he and his associates were shuttling underage girls to Little St. James for him to abuse, according to a complaint by Attorney General Denise George.

Henry said officials must now reckon with the reality of Epstein’s time in the Virgin Islands.

Some of that reckoning is now happening. After declining to investigate Epstein while he was alive, five months after his death, George filed a civil complaint claiming Epstein ran a child sex trafficking ring in the territory, funded by lucrative tax exemptions granted by the Economic Development Commission.

“In the end,” Henry said, “now the man is dead, the government is doing what the government is doing. But when he was alive, we weren’t really willing to hold him accountable.”

Henry said Epstein should be held up as a case study for correcting the loopholes that allowed him to thrive.

“I think we need to move forward and learn, just really deeply, how we allow money to influence decisions and things that we do that affect the greater community,” Henry said.



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